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Neopaganism

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Introduction

The Neopagan phenomenon is a loose collection of religious movements, experiments and jokes that offers a healthy alternative to the dogmatism of the Judeo/Christian/Islamic mainstream (on the one hand) and the mushy-mindedness of most 'New Age' groups (on the other).

This article, prepared at the request of a number of curious net. posters, offers a brief description of Neopagan thought and practice. A list of good sources for further study are listed at the end.

What is a Neopagan?

I used the term 'religious' above, but as you'll see it's actually more than somewhat misleading, and I (like many other Neopagans) use it only because no other word is available for the more general kind of thing of which the Neopagan movement and what we generally think of as 'religion' are special cases.

Neopaganism is 'religious' in the etymological sense of 're ligare', to rebind (to roots, to strengths, to the basics of things), and it deals with mythology and the realm of the 'spiritual'. But, as we in the Judeo/Christian West have come to understand 'religion' (an organized body of belief that connects the 'supernatural' with an authoritarian moral code via 'faith') Neopaganism is effectively and radically anti-religious. I emphasize this because it is important in understanding what follows.

Common characteristics of almost all the groups that describe themselves as 'Neopagan' (the term is often capitalized) include:

Anti-dogmatism

Neopagan religions are religions of practice, pragmatism and immediate experience. The emphasis is always on what they can help the individuals in them to *do* and *experience*; theology and metaphysics take a back seat, and very little 'faith' or 'belief' is required or expected. In fact many Neopagans (including yours truly) are actively hostile to 'faith' and all the related ideas of religious authority, 'divine revelation' and the like.

Compatibility with a scientific world-view

This tends to follow from the above. Because Neopaganism is centered in experiences rather than beliefs, it doesn't need or want to do vast overarching cosmologies or push fixed Final Answers to the Big Questions - understanding and helping human beings relate to each other and the world as we experience it is quite enough for us. Thus, we are generally friendly to science and the scientific world-view. Many of us are scientists and technologists ourselves (in fact, by some counts, a plurality of us are computer programmers!).

Reverence for nature, sensuality, and pleasure

Most Neopaganism make heavy use of nature symbolism and encourage people to be more aware of their ties to all the non-human life on this planet. Explicit worship of 'Gaia', the earth ecosphere considered as a single interdependent unit, is common. Veneration of nature deities is central to many traditions. Ecological activism is often considered a religious duty, though there is much controversy over what form it should take.

By preference, most Neopagans hold their ceremonies outdoors under sun or moon. Seasonal changes and astronomical rhythms (especially the solstices, equinoxes and full and new moons) define the ritual calendar.

Ritual and festive nudity are common; to be naked before nature is often considered a holy and integrating act in itself. Sex is considered sacramental and sexual energy and symbolism permeate Neopagan practice (we like to contrast this with Christianity, in which the central sacrament commemorates a murder and climaxes in ritual cannibalism).

Polytheism, pantheism, agnosticism

Most Neopaganism are explicitly polytheistic - that is, they recognize pantheons of multiple deities. But the reality behind this is more complex than it might appear.

First, many Neopagans are philosophical agnostics or even atheists; there is a tendency to regard 'the gods' as Jungian archetypes or otherwise in some sense created by and dependent on human belief, and thus naturally plural and observer-dependent.

Secondly, as in many historical polytheisms, there is an implicit though seldom-discussed idea that all the gods and goddesses we deal with are 'masks', refraction of some underlying unity that we cannot or should not attempt to approach directly.

And thirdly, there is a strong undercurrent of pantheism, the belief that the entire universe is in some important sense a responsive, resonating and sacred whole (or, which is different and subtler, that it is proper for human beings to view it that way).

Many Neopagans hold all three of these beliefs simultaneously.

Decentralized, non-authoritarian organization; no priestly elite

Neopagans have seen what happens when a priesthood elite gets temporal power; we want none of that. We do not take collections, build temples, or fund a full-time clergy. In fact the clergy-laity distinction is pretty soft; in many traditions, all members are considered 'in training' for it, and in all traditions every participant in a ritual is an active one; there are and can be no pew-sitting passive observers.

Most Neopagan traditions are (dis)organized as horizontal networks of small affinity groups (usually called 'circles', 'groves', or 'covens' depending on the flavor of Neopagan involved). Priests and priestesses have no real authority outside their own circles (and sometimes not much inside them!), though some do have national reputations.

Many of us keep a low profile partly due to a real fear of persecution. Too many of our spiritual ancestors were burned, hung, flayed and shot by religions that are still powerful for a lot of us to feel safe in the open. Down in the Bible Belt the burnings and beatings are still going on, and the media loves to hang that 'Satanist' label on anything it doesn't understand for a good juicy story.

Also, we never proselytize. This posting is about as active a Neopagan solicitation as anyone will ever see; we tend to believe that 'converts' are dangerous robots and that people looking to be 'converted' aren't the kind we want. We have found that it works quite well enough to let people find us when they're ready for what we have to teach.

Reverence for the female principle

One of the most striking differences between Neopagan groups and the religious mainstream is the wide prevalence (and in some traditions dominance) of the worship of goddesses. Almost all Neopagans revere some form of the Great Mother, often as a nature goddess identified with the ecosphere, and there are probably more female Neopagan clergy than there are male.

Most Neopagan traditions are equalist (these tend to pair the Great Mother with a male fertility-god, usually some cognate of the Greek Pan). A vocal and influential minority are actively feminist, and (especially on the West Coast) there have been attempts to present various Neopagan traditions as the natural 'women's religion' for the feminist movement. The effects of this kind of politicization of Neopaganism are a topic of intense debate within the movement and fuel some of its deepest factional divisions.

Respect for art and creativity

Neopaganism tends to attract artists and musicians as much as it attracts technologists. Our myth and ritual can be very powerful at stimulating and releasing creativity, and one of the greatest strengths of the movement is the rich outgrowth of music, poetry, crafts and arts that has come from that. It is quite common for people joining the movement to discover real talents in those areas that they never suspected.

Poets and musicians have the kind of special place at Neopagan festivals that they did in pre-literate cultures; many of our best-known people are or have been bards and songsmiths, and the ability to compose and improvise good ritual poetry is considered the mark of a gifted priest(ess) and very highly respected.

Eclecticism

"Steal from any source that doesn't run too fast" is a Neopagan motto. A typical Neopagan group will mix Greek, Celtic and Egyptian mythology with American Indian shamanism. Ritual technique includes recognizable borrowings from medieval ceremonial magic, Freemasonry and pre-Nicene Christianity, as well as a bunch of 20th-century inventions. Humanistic psychology and some of the more reproducible New Age healing techniques have recently been influential. The resulting stew is lively and effective, though sometimes a bit hard to hold together.

A sense of humor

Neopagans generally believe that it is more dangerous to take your religion too seriously than too lightly. Self-spoofery is frequent and (in some traditions) semi-institutionalized, and at least one major Neopagan tradition (Discordianism, known to many on this net) is *founded* on elaborate spoofery and started out as a joke.

One of the most attractive features of the Neopagan approach is that we don't confuse solemnity with gloom. Our rituals are generally celebratory and joyous, and a humorous remark at the right time need not break the mood.

We generally feel that any religion that can't stand to have fun poked at it is in as sad shape as the corresponding kind of person.

What kinds of Neopagan are there, and where did they come from?

Depending on who you talk to and what definitions you use, there are between 40,000 and 200,000 Neopagans in the U.S.; the true figure is probably closer to the latter than the former, and the movement is still growing rapidly following a major 'population explosion' in the late '70s.

The numerically largest and most influential Neopagan group is the 'Kingdom of Wicca' - the modern witch covens. Modern witchcraft has nothing to do with Hollywood's images of the cackling, cauldron-stirring crone (though Wiccans sometimes joke about that one) and is actively opposed to the psychopathic Satanism that many

Christians erroneously think of as 'witchcraft'. Your author is an initiate Wiccan priest and coven leader of long standing.

Other important subgroups include those seeking to revive Norse, Egyptian, Amerind, and various kinds of tribal pantheons other than the Greek and Celtic ones that have been incorporated into Wicca. These generally started out as Wiccan offshoots or have been so heavily influenced by Wiccan ritual technique that their people can usually work comfortably in a Wiccan circle and vice-versa.

There are also the various orders of ceremonial magicians, most claiming to be the successors to the turn-of-the-century Golden Dawn or one of the groups founded by Alesteir Crowley during his brilliant and notorious occult career. These have their own very elaborate ritual tradition, and tend to be more intellectual, more rigid, and less nature-oriented. They are sometimes reluctant to describe themselves as Neopagans.

The Discordians (and, more recently, the Discordian-offshoot Church of the Sub-Genius) are few in number but quite influential. They are the Neopagan movement's sacred clowns, puncturing pretense and adding an essential note to the pagan festivals. Many Wiccans, especially among priests and priestesses, are also Discordians and will look you straight in the eye and tell you that the entire Neopagan movement is a Discordian hoax

Neopaganism used to be largely a white, upper-middle-class phenomenon, but that has been changing during the last five years. So called 'new-collar' workers have come in droves during the eighties. We still see fewer non-whites, proportionately, than there are in the general population, but that is also changing (though more slowly). With the exception of a few nut-fringe 'Aryan' groups detested by the whole rest of the movement, Neopagans are actively anti-racist; prejudice is not the problem, it's more that the ideas have tended to be accepted by the more educated segments of society first, and until recently those more educated segments were mostly white.

On the East Coast, a higher-than-general-population percentage of Neopagans have Roman Catholic or Jewish backgrounds, but figures suggest this is not true nationwide. There is also a very significant overlap in population with science-fiction fandom and the Society for Creative Anachronism.

Politically, Neopagans are distributed about the same as the general population, except that whether liberal or conservative they tend to be more individualist and less conformist and moralistic than average. It is therefore not too surprising that the one significant difference in distribution is the presence of a good many more libertarians than one would see in a same-sized chunk of the general population (I particularly register this because I'm a libertarian myself, but non-libertarians have noted the same phenomenon). These complexities are obscured by the fact that the most politically active and visible Neopagans are usually ex-hippie left-liberals from the '60s.

I think the most acute generalization made about pagans as a whole is Margot Adler's observation that they are mostly self-made people, supreme individualists not necessarily in the assertive or egoist sense but because they have felt the need to construct their own culture, their own definitions, their own religious paths, out of whatever came to hand rather than accepting the ones that the mainstream offers.

Where do I find out more?

I have deliberately not said much about mythology, or specific religious practice or aims, or the role of magic and to what extent we practice and 'believe' in it. Any one of those is a topic for another posting; but you can get a lot of information from books. Here's a basic bibliography:

Adler, Margot *Drawing Down the Moon* (Random House 1979, hc)
This book is a lucid and penetrating account of who the modern neo-pagans are, what they do and why they do it, from a woman who spent almost two years doing observer-participant journalism in the neo-pagan community. Especially valuable because it combines an anthropologist's objectivity with a candid personal account of her own feelings about all she saw and did and how her ideas about the neo-pagans changed under the impact of the experiences she went through. Recommended strongly as a first book on the subject, and it's relatively easy to find. There is now a revised and expanded second edition available.

Starhawk *The Spiral Dance*
An anthology of philosophy, poetry, training exercises, ritual outlines and instructive anecdotes from a successful working coven. First-rate as an introduction to the practical aspects of magick and running a functioning circle. Often findable at feminist bookstores.

Shea, Robert and Wilson, Robert Anton *Illuminatus!* (Dell, 1975, pb)
This work of alleged fiction is an incredible berserko-surrealist rollercoaster that *will* bend your mind into a pretzel with an acid-head blitzkrieg of plausible, instructive and enlightening lies and a few preposterous and obscure truths. Amidst this eccentric tale of world-girdling conspiracies, intelligent dolphins, the fall of Atlantis, who *really* killed JFK, sex, drugs, rock and roll and the Cosmic Giggle Factor, you will find Serious Truths about Mind, Time, Space, the Nature of God(dess) and What It All Means - and also learn why you should on no account take them Seriously. Pay particular attention to Appendix Lamedh ("The Tactics of Magick"), but it won't make sense until you've read the rest. This was first published in 3 volumes as *The Eye In The Pyramid*, *The Golden Apple* and *Leviathan*, but there's now a one-volume trade paperback carried by most chain bookstores under SF.

Campbell, Joseph W., *The Masks of God* (Viking Books, 1971, pb)
One of the definitive analytical surveys of world mythography - and readable to boot! It's in 4 volumes:

- Primitive Mythology
- Oriental Mythology
- Occidental Mythology
- Creative Mythology

The theoretical framework of these books is a form of pragmatic neo-Jungianism which has enormously influenced the Neopagans (we can accurately be described as the practice for which Campbell and Jung were theorizing). Note especially his predictions in vols. I & IV of a revival of shamanic, vision-quest-based religious forms. The recent Penguin pb edition of this book should be available in the Mythology and Folklore selection of any large bookstore.

Bonewits, Isaac, *Real Magic* (Creative Arts Books, 1979, pb)
A fascinating analytical study of the psychodynamics of ritual and magick. This was Bonewits's Ph.D. thesis for the world's only known doctorate in Magic and Thaumaturgy (UCLA Berkeley, 1971). Hardest of the five to find but well worth the effort - an enormously instructive, trenchant and funny book.

Will there be more net.info on this topic?

I am also available to answer questions by email or phone. Be warned that I will probably tell you to go off and study some more, rather than referring you to a group, if you haven't read at least two out of the five above or else good equivalents like Michael Harner's *Way Of The Shaman* (Castaneda, UFOlogy books and anything on astrology or the Great Pyramid will *not* count! Grrr!).

No fooling, learning to do this stuff right is hard work and demands a lot more rigor and clear thinking than most people associate with 'occultism'. But it's also fun and empowering and could turn out to be one of the couple most important things you do with your life.

If response to this posting is heavy, I may post some stuff on Wiccan ritual practice and theology, that being what I know best.

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